**Faith On the Grow: Heaven on Earth**

**Revelation 22:1-5; Ephesians 1:20-23**

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I have a few books on my bookshelf in my office that I don’t think I need anymore. To be honest, there are a lot of books on my bookshelf that I probably have not opened in twenty years or more. There are probably some books that I have never read – books that were given to me by retiring pastors like my father-in-law – which are classics in the field of theology. I took them more for their historical importance than for personal edification and they looked good on my shelf.

And as it happens, you begin looking at your accumulated things, knowing that it is time to purge. So I have been looking at my books, pulling a few off here and there. There are some books that I remember caressing so lovingly and sometimes begrudgingly while I was in seminary, which I haven’t opened since seminary. In seminary you deal mainly with the philosophy of religion and theology. When you get into the pastorate, you put all those books on your shelf and begin scrambling to find books to help you with the day-to-day, practical side of ministry.

It’s been fun to pull a few of those books off the shelf – the ones I remember so well in seminary but haven’t touched since. I quickly thumb through them to see what I have underlined, or to read some of the notes I had taken in the margins. I do not recommend you do this if you wish to expedite the process.

One such book was Gordon Kaufman’s *Systematic Theology: A Historical Perspective.* It’s a real page-turner. But I was thumbing through it and ran across a page that I heavily underlined and started reading it. This is what it said:

The church knows that she must be a reconciling rather than dividing community, because she was established in and by a historical event in which God was reconciling the world (2Cor. 5:19-20); she knows she must bind up men’s wounds and forgive rather than hurt or destroy, since her master was a healer and one who forgave; she knows she should be willing to suffer and give up all claims on others, rather than strive for power and glory, “because Christ also suffered for (her), leaving (her) an example” (1 Peter 2:21); she knows she ought even to love and serve her enemies (Matthew 5:44) rather than seek their punishment or destruction, for she is found on an event in which God himself manifested forgiveness of his enemies (Romans 5:10) through Jesus’ forgiveness of those who were destroying him (Luke 23:34). (Pg. 486)

After I read that, I thought to myself, “My goodness, this God we have is a mysterious little muse. For as I was purging my things, the relics of my past provided me with the summation of my current sermon series. That’s bad news in one way. The hoarder side of my personality quickly stepped up to the microphone and shouted, “See, don’t get rid of these things. They’re valuable. You never know when you are going to need them.” My more theologically astute side is winning though. God has more than one way to get through my thick head. If the book were not there, God would have found another way. With all due respect to Gordon Kaufman, his book will be finding a new shelf upon which to reside or be recycled. But not without one last opportunity to inspire me.

So we have been working through this sermon series called “Faith on the Grow.” We are looking at the possibility that the Christian Church is at the precipice, or even already in the throes of major change – a shift in understanding and priorities. We have likened it to the Reformation, which celebrates its 500th year this month. So this is not just a generational squabble on whether we can wear tennis shoes to church, (and there is a story behind that comment), but the fact that the church needs to take a drastic change in direction, if it is going to have a future. Even more to the point is if it is going to stay true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The fact is, we do not have a static God. God is always on the move. God is always creating. When Moses met God in the burning bush and God commanded Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Hebrew people go, Moses said, “Alright, but who should I tell him sent me?” That is, “What’s your name?” And God responded, “I am who I am. Tell him ‘I Am’ sent you.” That’s the usual translation. The Hebrew can also be translated “I will be who I will be” or “I will be who I need to be.”

Because God is dynamic, our faith is also dynamic – we will be whom we need to be – always changing and growing so that the grace of God might always be present and relevant, and life changing. What we discovered is that the nature of institutions tends to be static and self-preserving. They begin to exist for themselves and lose their mission. It happens to almost all institutions, including Christianity. It is easy to understand why. As Christians we are always looking back to what God did 2,000 years ago.

Now don’t get me wrong. That was pretty significant. It’s not every day that the one who’s very life is God in the flesh, lives among us, is killed and raised from the dead. That is after all, why we call ourselves Christian. But what is clear from the Gospels is that moment when God took historical action to redeem humanity, is not simply to be placed on the calendar and once a year we remind ourselves how good and gracious God was. It was the turning point in history when God freed humanity to be that very body of redemption.

God’s gracious action toward humanity did not end with the resurrection of Jesus. It changed bodies. St. Paul articulates this better than anyone. He is constantly referring to the church as the “body of Christ.” In our Ephesians lesson, Paul says, *“God put this power to work in Christ… And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”* Paul sees the function of the church as the same function of Jesus. Or as we quoted Kaufman earlier – to forgive, to heal, to suffer, to love and serve friends and enemies alike, to give up claims of power and authority, to be about the work of reconciling. In short, to be the vessel for God to be incarnate among us, to the end that the Realm of God might be experienced in our midst – “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

While looking back to the Christ event is important and necessary, it may also impede our ability to embody the Christ event today. And looking too far forward can also prevent the Church from being the active body of Christ today.

I believe in heaven. I haven’t a clue what it will be like. John tries to give us an image in our reading from Revelation. There is a constant flow of fresh water. Fruit ready to pick and eat all year round. The leaves of the trees are medicine that heals the ills of the nations. No need to fear the darkness or the unknown for the light of God shines on all making all things known. The metaphor would be quite luxurious for John’s time with the constant flow of fresh water and never ending food. Today, we might add in our picture of heaven high speed Internet no matter where you are.

Sometimes you have to have a vision of what is to come. And at the time that John wrote his vision, the Christian Church was being sorely persecuted. I believe John was trying to give a little moral encouragement to those who were suffering. God hasn’t forgotten you. In fact one day God will make all things right, and the bad guys will suffer and the good guys will be pampered, and live in eternal bliss.

I believe in heaven, but I haven’t a clue what it will be like. I am just certain that the God who created me to live and die will be a good steward of my spirit. One of the dangers, though, of looking forward to heaven, is that we give up on today. No sense worrying about all the problems and injustice of today. God will make it better by and by. By so saying we shirk our call to be the Body of Christ.

You have heard the old saying, “Don’t be so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good.” Harry Emerson Fosdick, who was a pastor at Riverside Church in Manhattan, once said, “Our mission is not to get (people) to heaven” but “to bring heaven to earth.”

Now, Don Strobe would have a problem with that. I said something similar in one of my ordination papers. Don was on the Board of Ordained Ministry at the time and was one of readers of my papers. He circled that sentence with a red pen and wrote, “We do not bring heaven to earth. Only God can do that.” I happen to agree with him.

However, if the Church is the body of Christ as Paul proclaims, if we as an institution, the Church, are blessed to continue the ministry of Jesus with healing and suffering, and forgiving, and loving and serving friends and enemies alike, and giving up claims of power and authority, and be about the work of reconciling; if we are indeed the vessel for God to be incarnate among us, is that not heaven in our midst?

So how do you think we are doing as the “body of Christ?” How are we doing as “God incarnate in the world?” I think there would be mixed reviews, and some reviews not so mixed. That’s maybe why there is this existential angst in the Church today. That’s why there is the need for deep introspection and reforming in order to grow into the next age of Christendom.

In this sermon series, we have talked about the priorities of Christianity needing to change. We seem to have put too much emphasis on correct beliefs as opposed to correct conduct – having the right concept of Jesus seems more important than following the example of Jesus. We talked about how to move from believing to loving, but that loving is more than an accumulation of good deeds. In short, you can believe and still not follow. You can do good deeds and still not love. That struck home in a particularly powerful way this last weekend when I once again listened to one of the more popular Bible lessons.

Rev. John Newberg read 1 Corinthians 13 at his daughter Karen’s (Newburg now Hetrick’s) wedding. He read this from Eugene Peterson’s version, The Message:

*If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.*

*If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, but I don't love, I’m nothing.*

*If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.*

That’s pretty powerful and sobering, isn’t it? “No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love. It is difficult to define love. Love is action, but there can be action without love. More than what we do, love is an attitude concerning the other, wishing as much or more for the other than for yourself. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. The Son so loved the world that he would suffer the cross, so that the church might become the embodiment of redemption for all the ages. As Kaufman says:

By reconciling rather than dividing.

By healing and forgiving, instead of hurting and destroying.

By a willingness to suffer and give up all claims on others, rather than strive for power and glory,

By loving and serving all, even her enemies.

That is, to have the same mind as Christ.

Faith on the grow is to be transformed by this call of God in our lives. For what purpose? So that one day we may get to heaven? No! So that all might experience heaven today and God in our midst now.

I pray that will be true for your life and for mine. Amen.